

54th Military Police Company Commentary Driving Initiative as Part of Law Enforcement Training

By Captain Mary M. Caruso

Basic driver skills training should be the cornerstone of every Emergency Vehicle Operator's Course (EVOC) that is conducted as part of the Law Enforcement Training Program. Commentary driver's training (training in which the driver is encouraged to talk or provide commentary) is incorporated into many civilian law enforcement EVOC courses, and we in the 54th Military Police Company wanted to make it part of ours. So, as we completed law and order certification and began fulfilling the road commitment, we implemented a Commentary Driver's Initiative Program for junior drivers (Soldiers under the age of 21 and E4 or below). This training is designed to increase the hazard awareness and risk perception of junior drivers. Historically, accidents involving junior military police Soldiers have not been simply a result of bad basic driving skills or Soldiers' inattentiveness, but rather of tunnel vision and the unintentional risk-taking behavior commonly experienced by younger drivers with elevated adrenaline levels such as those that occur when responding with activated lights and sirens.

The aim of a 2008 study on the "Effect of Video-Based Road Commentary Training on the Hazard Perception Skills of Teenage Novice Drivers" was to answer the question of whether hazard perception can be improved through road commentary training. The outcome was astonishing. The hazard detection skills of the novice driver group (drivers under the age of 25) significantly improved after they viewed 12 trials of video-based commentary training. These results strongly indicate that commentary driver's training is an effective method of road safety intervention for young drivers.

The concept of the Commentary Driving Initiative adopted by the 54th Military Police Company is simple. The main objectives are to—

- Mentor junior Soldiers who lack driving and life experiences.
- Improve the cognitive skills of junior Soldiers.
- Reduce the effects (tunnel vision and risk-taking behavior) resulting from the adrenaline rush associated with responding to an incident.

To accomplish these objectives, a noncommissioned officer (NCO) accompanies each junior driver and—

- Provides mentorship for basic driving skills.
- Assesses the driver's skills and abilities.
- Encourages the driver to provide commentary on the daily hazards and risks surrounding the patrol car.

While the driver operates the vehicle, the NCO mentor asks a series of questions. These questions allow the NCO mentor to assist in building and shaping the junior driver's thought processes and developing his or her visual scanning ability, attention to detail, hazard recognition

ability, and risk perception, which are critical safe-driving skills—especially for police.

It is especially important to reduce the occurrence of tunnel vision in junior drivers. With lights flashing, sirens screaming, and two-way radio traffic blaring while moving at an accelerated rate of speed, deciphering existing weather and road conditions, and combating other traffic on the road, the junior driver has much to think about and process on the way to a scene. Their basic senses are overloaded! The increased workload on thought processes during hazardous situations places them in a high-risk category for impaired detection. For example, research indicates that, due to limited driving experience, the eyes of novice drivers are fixated on hazardous objects longer than those of experienced drivers. This results in the reduced ability of novice drivers to detect peripheral events. One way to combat this problem is through driver training and experience. Another is the strict enforcement of standing operating procedures for "running code" with activated lights and sirens in response to hazardous events. The Commentary Driver's Initiative covers these areas, focusing on attention to detail and information recall.

To successfully complete the Commentary Driver's Training, students must pass a final driver's exam. Platoon and company leaders also use the same exam for quarterly check rides with junior drivers.

The Commentary Driver's Program is one that can be implemented immediately, with limited strain on unit resources. And our 45-day junior driver mentorship program has made a world of difference. For those who might be interested in initiating their own Commentary Driver's Program, here are the specific task, condition,

and standard used for the 54th Military Police Company commentary driver's training:

Task: Improve cognitive and commentary driving skills to increase hazard awareness and alleviate tunnel vision while driving in high-stress situations.

Condition: While conducting law enforcement duties in an issued patrol car, drivers answer specific questions asked of them by their mentors to improve their awareness of hazards while driving.

Standard: Drivers are able to effectively identify hazards while continuing to drive safely.

Basic driver skills training should be the cornerstone of every EVOC conducted under the Law Enforcement Training Program. Commentary driver's training, which is commonly employed by our civilian law enforcement

counterparts, is a valuable tool that can be used to develop the driving skills of our junior military police Soldiers by increasing their hazard awareness and risk perception, thereby making them better, safer drivers.

Reference:

Amy Rose Williamson, "Effect of Video-Based Road Commentary Training on the Hazard Perception Skills of Teenage Novice Drivers," thesis submitted for a master's of social sciences in psychology degree from the University of Waikato, New Zealand, 2008.

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Sample Questions From the Final Driver's Exam

Vehicle/Equipment Operator's Qualification

1. Does the driver possess a valid state driver's license without any revocations or suspensions? If so, from which state? What is the expiration date?
2. Does the driver possess a valid DA Form 348 (*Equipment Operator's Qualification Record [Except Aircraft]*) authorizing him or her to operate the appropriate vehicle? If so, what is the expiration date?
3. Did the driver complete the mandatory (online) vehicle safety course? If so, what date was the course completed?
4. Did the driver attend and satisfactorily complete the Fort Lewis EVOC? If so, what date was the course completed?

Before-Operation Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services (PMCS)

1. Did the driver satisfactorily complete a thorough PMCS of the vehicle before operation to ensure that instruments were working properly?
2. Did the driver check vehicle fluid levels to ensure that they were appropriate?
3. Did the driver check the condition of the vehicle and tires and the operation of the headlights, battery, horn, and hand and foot brakes?
4. Did the driver ensure that emergency equipment (fire extinguisher, warning kits) was present in the vehicle?
5. Did the driver conduct a thorough "walk around" of the vehicle to ensure that it was clear of any debris or obstruction before moving the vehicle?
6. Did the driver make the necessary adjustments to mirrors, seats, and any other equipment that required adjustment before starting the vehicle? Did the driver buckle the seatbelt?
7. Did the driver conduct a dry run of vehicle controls (gears, brakes, front axle)?

During Vehicle Operation

1. Did the driver properly use depth perception to ensure that the vehicle had enough clearance to safely pull out of the designated parking area without hitting other vehicles or objects?
2. Did the driver properly use turn signals (in the direction of travel), look in all directions, and use mirrors to ensure that the road was safe and clear before departing from the parking area and proceeding into traffic?
3. Did the driver continuously maintain the vehicle's speed according to the posted speed limit?
4. Did the driver continuously scan the roadway (front, rear, and sides) for traffic and other objects that might unexpectedly enter the roadway?
5. Did the driver use a turn signal (if necessary) to indicate the upcoming direction of travel when approaching and while stopped at a stop sign? Did the driver stop the vehicle behind the white line painted at the designated stopping area? Did the driver look in all directions to ensure that the road was clear from other traffic before safely proceeding in the intended direction of travel?
6. Did the driver apply the same principles outlined in Question 5 when stopping at a red light?

7. Did the driver yield for traffic at yield signs?
8. Did the driver yield for pedestrians at designated pedestrian crossings?
9. Did the driver use a turn signal to indicate an upcoming lane change before conducting the change? Did the driver turn his or her head and eyes and use mirrors to ensure that traffic was clear before executing the lane change? Did the driver gradually proceed to execute the lane change?
10. When backing into a parking location, did the driver use a ground guide (if available) or dismount the vehicle and inspect the area behind it for obstructions that could not be seen from inside?
11. Ask the driver—
 - What is the name of the street we are on?
 - What is the most significant landmark to your current location?
 - What is your current direction of travel?
 - What is the legal speed limit on this portion of the roadway?
 - What hazards do you currently see?
 - How many pedestrians have you seen in the last 5 minutes?
 - What is the next major intersection that you will be approaching?
 - What is the structure of the upcoming intersection? How many center lanes, right-turn lanes, and left-turn lanes are there?
 - How many pedestrians are waiting to cross the street at the upcoming crosswalk?
 - How many vehicles were stopped at the last intersection where you were stopped?
 - What is the color of the car three cars ahead of you in the left/right lane?
 - What was the color of the last vehicle that passed you in the oncoming lane?
 - What type of vehicle was behind you last?
 - What is the safest, most direct route back to the provost marshal's office?

After Vehicle Operation

1. Did the driver place the vehicle in "park" and use the parking brake?
2. Did the driver turn off all instruments before turning off the vehicle engine?
3. Did the driver perform after-operation PMCS checks on the vehicle (such as cleaning out trash) before turning it in to vehicle dispatch for inspection and supervisor review?